

Senate Bill 260
February 19, 2013
Presented by Ken McDonald
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, I am Ken McDonald, Wildlife Division Administrator of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 260 because of its impact to resident hunter opportunity.

SB 260 would expand nonresident participation in controlled hunts for large predators to 35% from the current 10% limit set for all game species by statute. At present, mountain lions are the only large predator in Montana currently managed with controlled hunt licenses, and then only in Region 1 (northwest MT) where the controlled permits run season long and in Region 2 (western MT) where the controlled permit season changes to a general season after February 1 if the quota is not met. General mountain lion seasons in these regions were replaced with limited permit lion hunts over the past 10 years, due to excessive hunting pressure and a "race to kill" environment that impacted hunt quality, confounded quota management and was fueled in part by nonresident hunters and their guides.

To give an example of what this bill would do, during 2012, there were 2,215 Montana residents who applied for the 361 special mountain lion licenses in Regions 1 and 2. Under the 10% limitation, special mountain lion licenses were issued to 332 residents and 29 nonresidents. HB 260 would change that allocation to 296 residents and 65 nonresidents. Therefore, using 2012 application rates for the example, HB 260 would shift 36 special lion licenses from Montana resident to nonresident hunters. Because the resident demand for mountain lion hunting opportunity greatly exceeds the supply, FWP expects considerable opposition to this change from Montana residents, most notably from the Montana hound hunting community. And especially, because additional nonresident hunters are not needed to meet management objectives for mountain lions.

It is also important to recognize that nonresident hunters have unlimited opportunity to participate in general mountain lion seasons in FWP Regions 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. They can also hunt in Region 2 after February 1 if there are unfilled quotas. Therefore, nonresidents already have unlimited access to most of the mountain lion hunting opportunity in Montana.

Finally, we are hoping to delist grizzly bears within the next couple of years, and implement limited hunting seasons for them after delisting. This bill would result in a relatively high proportion of those highly coveted licenses going to nonresident hunters at the expense of resident hunters who shouldered much of the burden for grizzly bear recovery.

The issues surrounding limited license allocation are complex and often contentious. The current statutory framework has been in place since 1979 and is the product of much legislative history and Montana resident expectations. Additionally, the current season structure for mountain lions is the product of continuous negotiation and cooperation, and numerous Commission adoptions in the context of considerable public involvement. The system we have in place is working. For this reason, FWP respectfully requests a Do Not Pass on SB 260.

Salient Facts

1. Upon enactment of the new permit system in Regions 1 & 2, Twenty-Four (24) outfitters immediately lost 20% or greater of their gross income from providing outfitting services.
2. The ripple effect extends to the houndsmen hired by the outfitters, local businesses such as restaurants, hotels, gas stations, sporting goods stores, etc. It is estimated that there has been a minimum of \$1,000,000 in much needed revenue lost in these communities annually from the loss of nonresident visitation during a period (December to March) difficult to attract tourist revenue.
3. Nearly 95% of all lion hunting in these regions is done on USFS land, national interest property. These unique lands were set aside for the enjoyment of all Americans – residents and nonresidents alike.
4. Since the enactment of this permit process, the majority of districts have not met the quota of lions as set forth by the Department. In many years harvest as a percentage of granted permits has been less than 50% for multiple years. The impact on ungulates in many districts has been severe in particular when combined with other predation and severe winter conditions.
5. In response to quotas not being met year-after-year, many of the district quotas have been nearly doubled in a 7-year span. Clearly the department understands that the predator management objective is not being met by the new system, but increasing quotas in an attempt to guess the fulfillment to quota percentage is a slippery slope. This system runs just as great a risk of having a material over harvest of the species in any one year as the old pure open quota system.
6. For reasons not fully understood, resident permit holders are simply not harvesting lions. Perhaps they didn't get out as much as they would have liked, don't have the resources to hire an outfitter, or would simply prefer to tree a cat versus harvest one. Regardless, of the reason the facts are quite clear, the current system does not manage lion population numbers as predators.
7. The proposed increase to allocated permits to nonresidents is at the discretion of the Commission. It is not mandatory, but merely a means by which the Commission can effect better management of the predator as required by statute on a district by district basis. The decision process is still maintained by the Commission, this only gives them more latitude to effectuate solutions.

Conclusion

The industry is looking for workable solutions that allow participation by all on a more equitable basis, while at the same time properly manage a predator that impacts our precious ungulate populations.

Please support SB260!